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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ON CIVIL WAR ANNIVERSARY, CIVIL SOCIETY
MOVEMENT GROWS

REF: BEIRUT 00488

Summary

¶1. (SBU) April 13 marked the 33rd anniversary of the outbreak of the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war and a number of civil society organizations marked the occasion with public events.

Commemorative events have been held in the past, but this year's events are drawing more participants and public attention than before, which some link to anxiety resulting from the current political impasse. The range of programs was extensive: a photography exhibit and reception with family members whose loved ones "disappeared" during the civil war, a lecture about international experiences with post-war truth and reconciliation committees, a march with hundreds of participants along the former "Green Line," an exhibit displaying political posters from the civil war period, and a week-long outdoor artistic downtown event which gives average Lebanese citizens an opportunity to give voice to their war memories. These events reflect the growing strength of civil society, concern feel about the current political vacuum and the desire to avoid another civil war, and the long-term need for reconciliation and remembrance initiatives to promote societal healing. End Summary.

Searching for Answers

¶2. (SBU) One conference participant summarized this surge of events eloquently. "There are unhealed wounds in the Lebanese psyche which are being exacerbated by the current political instability. The amnesty laws of the 1990's failed to deal with war crimes in a meaningful way and we see the perpetrators of these crimes every day on TV because they are still in power. We don't want a repeat of the civil war in order to settle grudges, but we do want answers." Some family members also told us that the Special Tribunal for Rafik Hariri's murder has overshadowed effort to find justice for "the ordinary people of Lebanon."

¶3. (SBU) Another important theme emerged, which is the need to educate Lebanese youth on what the civil war really meant. There have been recent violent street skirmishes between youth from opposing political parties. Those who lived through the civil war want the youth (many of them born since the end of the civil war) to fully understand the ramifications of their actions during this vulnerable period in Lebanon.

"Missing" Exhibit a Personal Experience for the Families

¶4. (SBU) The Umam Documentation and Research Center, run by independent Shia activist Lokman Slim (reftel) and his wife Monika Borgmann, is an NGO founded in 2004 to deal with Lebanon's civil war memories. With a belief that an act of parliament or the Taef Accords are unable to adequately "close the files" on war crimes, Umam has an ambitious program in 2008 to "respectfully examine the past." Umam is also committed to archiving primary sources of information, including posters, pamphlets and first-person interviews, which document Lebanon's past. (Note: Youth leaders have also raised this issue with the Charge. There is no single, objective source of information which is used in Lebanese schools to discuss the country's modern history. The history texts used in Lebanese private and public schools stop in ¶1943. End Note.)

¶5. (SBU) The "Missing" photography event was put together by Umam staff, who visited with the family members of hundreds of Lebanese citizens who disappeared during the civil war. Umam staff told us that putting the exhibition together was an emotional experience. Families longed to share stories about their loved ones and were eager to donate large amounts of documents on the cases to the Umam archives. On April 10, over 500 people gathered for the gala opening of the exhibit. The majority of the attendees were women: the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of the disappeared. Many approached the Charge to share with her their personal stories. One of the most striking aspects was also the diversity of the crowd. Though Lokman Slim is an independent Shia, the majority of the missing victims were Sunni and Christian. Slim has told us that he places national issues before confessional identification and this exhibit showed

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that his words are backed up by action.

Lecture Focuses on Truth and Reconciliation Experiences

¶6. (SBU) In conjunction with the "Missing" exhibit, Umam partnered with the German Embassy and the International Center for Transitional Justice for a lecture on the truth and reconciliation models followed in Germany and South Africa. The German Ambassador to Lebanon, Hansjorg Haber, spoke eloquently on Germany's painful and long-term process of coming to terms with the Holocaust.

¶7. (SBU) Haber was followed by Dr. Alan Boraine, former Vice President of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Boraine stressed that each country's experience would be unique, but Lebanon was clearly in a "transitional phase" as it emerges from civil war and Syrian occupation and seeks to successfully transform the nation's institutions democratically. He called for accountability, in order to provide family members with the answers they had been seeking for years. He also called for institutional reform, which he defined as ensuring that the state and government were of service to the entire nation without discrimination. He also urged the government of Lebanon to "take responsibility for the victims." Boraine said the GOL should help educate orphans, provide services to fractured families and take the lead in planning and funding a national memorial for war victims. Boraine also announced that his current organization, the International Center for Transitional Justice, had opened an office in Beirut to help the Lebanese nation work through the complex truth and reconciliation process.

Hizballah Allows Memorial March Along the Green Line

¶8. (SBU) On April 13, hundreds of Lebanese citizens marched

to commemorate the 33rd anniversary of the outbreak of the civil war. Opposition supporters, who have been camped in tents in the downtown area for more than 16 months, raised their barricades to allow the march to peacefully proceed along the "Green Line," which divided Christian and Muslim neighborhoods during the civil war. The march ended when the group planted an olive tree symbolizing peace in one of the city's public gardens. Local staff tell us that commemorative events have been held in the past, but that the 2008 events, such as this march, are drawing more participants and public attention than ever before. According to the march organizer, Melham Khalaf, "We are going through a phase in which the whole country feels in danger. This is a turning point for Lebanese civil society."

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Political Posters Viewed as "Signs of Conflict"
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¶9. (SBU) An American University of Beirut professor, Dr. Zeina Masri, has assembled an exhibit which focuses on the political posters produced by warring factions during the civil war. According to Masri, the graphic signs became a regular part of life for Lebanese citizens as political parties strove to legitimize their battle for power and territorial control. The exhibit is being praised for visually articulating the desires, fears and collective memory of this period. Most striking, perhaps, is that Hizballah lent posters from its own archive to be displayed as "works on loan" during the exhibit, which is on display at Beirut's "Planet Discovery" science museum in the Solidere neighborhood renovated by late PM Rafiq Hariri.

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Unique Image Draws Crowd in Downtown
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¶10. (SBU) A display of 600 toilets in a downtown Beirut empty lot has generated considerable public attention in Lebanon. This installation is part of a week-long program titled "Isn't 15 years in the toilet enough?" and sponsored by the Lebanese Association for Human Rights, with quiet financial support from AI/OTI. During the civil war, often the bathroom was the only location in a family home secure from flying bullets and shrapnel. People spent long periods of time during the 15 year conflict huddled in that room and the "seating" provided by the exhibit's toilets are meant to physically remind people of that experience. During the

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opening ceremony on April 13, attended by the Charge and Special Assistant, moving and personal testimonies on the civil war were shared. The crowd listened silently as one Shia participant rose to admit that he had been part of the armed militias which had split apart the country. He admitted that he had injured and killed some of his neighbors and he publicly asked for forgiveness. The crowd gave him a warm round of applause and many guests said that Lebanon needed more of these personal and local acts of contrition.

¶11. (SBU) Another guest spoke at length with the Charge about his family's experience. His father and his cousin disappeared during the war and had been featured in the "Missing" exhibit. He said that he was able to condone General Aoun's civil war behavior because at least he had been following a soldier's code of conduct. However, he said that he could not understand how Walid Jumblatt and Samir Geagea, who led militias accused of human rights abuses during the war, continue to be received as national leaders by the international community. He added that it was extremely difficult to listen to these leaders in the press every day, knowing their backgrounds, and he said that it would be in the best interest of Lebanon if they would step aside and let younger members speak for the Jumblatt and Geagea constituencies. Interestingly, he said he had nothing against the Hariri family and the Future Party. His "dream

solution" would be to have Aoun and Hariri unite to lead Lebanon in the future -- a scenario which seems highly unlikely.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Lebanese civil society does seem to be spreading its wings this spring, after long years spent under Syrian repression and after recovering from the shock of the 2006 war. Post will be exploring ways to support this reconciliation and remembrance work in the future. Most of the events and exhibits have taken place in Beirut, but it will be important for these exhibits to travel throughout the country in an effort to continue this important dialogue.
End Comment.
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